

THE  
POET COWPER

AND  
HIS BROTHER.

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## POET COWPER AND HIS BROTHER.

It is the usual characteristic of minds which have been brought by the powerful operations of the grace of God, to feel "the terrors of the Lord for sin," and through the extension of that unmerited mercy which is in Christ Jesus, have experienced repentance and reconciliation, that they are filled with a Christian love which longs for the salvation of all, and especially of those who are allied to them by the ties of consanguinity, or by strong personal attachments. The early life of the poet Cowper was passed in a state of carelessness and irreligion. The natural proneness to melancholy which his mental constitution early indicated, was greatly increased by the resistance he offered to those convictions for sin with which he was mercifully favoured, and to such a depth of melancholy was he frequently plunged, that life itself became a burden, while the anguish and conflict of his mind created a tempest of grief and despair, that shook reason itself from her throne. It pleased the Lord to work his deliverance from this state of thralldom, by the same means which first convinced him of sin, the secret though powerful operations of his grace in the soul; and as if to magnify its all sufficiency, external means were little concerned in it. The dark clouds of gloom and despair which had long hung over him, were dispelled by the bright arising of Christ Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, exalted in his view as the one complete atonement for sin, and the Redeemer and Friend of sinners. The peace and joy which he now felt in believing, far transcended all the delights which the world could bestow, and filled his soul with the most delightful emotions of gratitude and thanksgiving to his God and Saviour. Having experimentally felt the preciousness of an interest in Jesus Christ, his heart glowed with desire, that all his friends and kindred might become participants in the rich blessing, and for his brother, whom he tenderly loved, he was peculiarly solicitous.

His account of the last illness of this brother is deeply interesting, and contains much instruction. It exhibits the Christian principles and feelings of William Cowper, evinces the fondness of his attachment to his brother, the anxious concern he felt for the welfare of his immortal soul, and sheds additional lustre on his own amiable and excellent character.

But it is not in this point of view only that the narrative is valuable ; it shows the emptiness and vanity of a mere profession of Christianity, or a system of religion built up by human wisdom and contrivance. His brother was a minister of the established church of England, and had received a liberal education. Of strict moral habits, and regular in the observance of the external duties of religion, he imagined himself, and was thought by others, to be religious. He had little idea of *regeneration*, or of the sanctifying influence of the Spirit, and was a total stranger to those deep and powerful convictions of the sinfulness of sin, and the preciousness of pardon through the blood of Christ, which had been sealed by dear-bought experience on the mind of his brother. Cowper seems to have been aware that his brother's religion was too superficial, floating in the head more than pervading the heart, and he longed with earnest desire for his thorough and radical conversion. He strove therefore to call his attention to the *spirituality* of religion, and to convince him that salvation consisted in something more than mere formulas of faith, or scholastic disquisitions on theology. His narrative commences thus :—

“ As soon as it had pleased God, after a long and sharp season of conviction, to visit me with the consolations of his grace, it became one of my chief concerns, that my relations might be made partakers of the same mercy. In the first letter I wrote to my brother, I took occasion to declare what God had done for my soul, and am not conscious, that from that period down to his last illness I wilfully neglected an opportunity of engaging him, if it were possible, in conversation of a spiritual kind. When I left St. Albans, and went to visit him at Cambridge, my heart being full of the subject, I poured it out before him without reserve ; and in all my subsequent dealings with him, so far as I was enabled, took care to show that I had received not merely *a set of notions*, but a real impression of the truths of the gospel.

“ At first I found him ready enough to talk with me on these subjects ; sometimes he would dispute, but always without heat or animosity, and sometimes would endeavour to reconcile the difference of our sentiments, by supposing that at the bottom we were both of a mind, and meant the same thing.

“ He was a man of a most candid and ingenuous spirit ; his temper remarkably sweet ; and in his behaviour to me, he had always manifested an uncommon affection. His outward conduct, so far as it fell under my notice, or I could learn it by the report of others, was perfectly decent and unblamable.

“ There was nothing vicious in any part of his practice ; but being of a studious, thoughtful turn, he placed his chief delight in the acquisition of learning, and made such acquisitions in it, that he had but few rivals in that of a classical kind. He was

critically skilled in the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew languages; was beginning to make himself master of the Syriac, and perfectly understood the French and Italian, the latter of which he could speak fluently. These attainments, however, and many others in the literary way, he lived heartily to despise, not as useless when sanctified and employed in the service of God, but when sought after for their own sake, and with a view to the praise of men. Learned, however, as he was, he was easy and cheerful in his conversation, and entirely free from the stiffness which is generally contracted by men devoted to such pursuits.

"Thus we spent about two years, conversing as occasion offered, (and we generally visited each other once or twice a week, as long as I continued at Huntingdon,) upon the leading truths of the gospel. By this time, however, he began to be more reserved; he would hear me patiently, but never reply; and this I found upon his own confession afterwards, was the effect of a resolution he had taken, in order to avoid disputes, and to secure the continuance of that peace which had always subsisted between us. When our family removed to Olney, our intercourse became less frequent. We exchanged an annual visit, and whenever he came amongst us, he observed the same conduct, conforming to all our customs, attending family worship with us, and heard the preaching, received civilly whatever passed in conversation upon the subject, but adhered strictly to the rule he had prescribed to himself, never remarking upon or objecting to any thing he heard or saw."

In 1769 John Cowper was taken ill, and was in a short time so much reduced, that his life was considered in danger. Cowper was sent for to Cambridge, where his brother resided, and he thus describes the state of mind in which he found him.

"In this state of imminent danger, he seemed to have no more concern about his spiritual interests, than when in perfect health. His couch was strewed with volumes of plays, to which he had frequent recourse for amusement. I learned indeed afterwards, that even at this time, the thoughts of God and eternity would often force themselves upon his mind; but not apprehending his life to be in danger, and trusting in the morality of his past conduct, he found it no difficult matter to thrust them out again."

From this sickness he recovered, but in the following year he was visited with more severe illness, which continued with little intermission until his decease. His careless and unconcerned state, awakened the most painful anxiety in the mind of his brother, whose feelings were too tremblingly alive to the unspeakable value of an immortal soul, and the vast concerns of eternity, not to fear lest death should arrest him, before the

great work of redemption was accomplished. The following extracts will disclose his views.

“On the 16th February, 1770, I was again summoned to attend him, by letters which represented him as so ill, that the physician entertained but little hopes of his recovery. I found him afflicted with the asthma and dropsy, supposed to be the effect of an imposthume in his liver. He was, however, cheerful when I first arrived, expressed great joy at seeing me, thought himself much better than he had been, and seemed to flatter himself with hopes that he should be well again. My situation at this time was truly distressful. I learned from the physician, that, in this instance, as in the last, he was in much greater danger than he suspected. He did not seem to lay his illness at all to heart, nor could I find by his conversation that he had one serious thought. As often as a suitable occasion offered, when we were free from company and interruption, I endeavoured to give a spiritual turn to the discourse, and the day after my arrival, asked his permission to pray with him, to which he readily consented. I renewed my attempts in this way as often as I could, though without any apparent success; still he seemed as careless and unconcerned as ever; yet I could not but consider his willingness in this instance, as a token for good, and observed with pleasure, that though at other times he discovered no mark of seriousness, yet when I spoke to him of the Lord’s dealings with myself, he received what I said with affection, would press my hand, and look kindly at me, and seemed to love me the better for it.

“On the 21st of the same month, he had a violent fit of the asthma, which seized him when he rose, about an hour before noon, and lasted all the day. His agony was dreadful. Having never seen any person afflicted in the same way, I could not help fearing that he would be suffocated; nor was the physician himself without fears of the same kind. This day the Lord was very present with me, and enabled me, as I sat by the poor sufferer’s side, to wrestle for a blessing upon him. I observed to him, that though it had pleased God to visit him with great affliction, yet mercy was mingled with the dispensation. I said, ‘You have many friends who love you, and are willing to do all they can to serve you; and so perhaps have others in like circumstances; but it is not the lot of every sick man, how much soever he may be beloved, to have a friend that can pray for him.’ He replied, ‘That is true, and I hope God will have mercy on me.’ His love for me at this time became very remarkable; there was a tenderness in it more than was merely natural; and he generally expressed it by calling for blessings upon me in the

most affectionate terms, and with a look and manner not to be described.

“At night, when he was quite worn out with the fatigue of labouring for breath, and could get no rest, his asthma still continuing, he turned to me and said with a melancholy air, ‘Brother, I seem to be marked out for misery; you know some people are so.’ That moment I felt my heart enlarged, and such a persuasion of the love of God towards him was wrought in my soul, that I replied with confidence, and as if I had authority given me to say it, ‘But this is not your case; you are marked out for mercy.’

“I never heard a murmuring word escape him; on the contrary, he would often say, when his pains were most acute, “I only wish it may please God to enable me to suffer without complaining; I have no right to complain.’ Once he said with a loud voice, ‘Let thy rod and thy staff support and comfort me; and oh! that it were with me as in times past, when the candle of the Lord shone upon my tabernacle.’ One evening, when I had been expressing my hope that the Lord would show him mercy, he replied, ‘I hope he will; I am sure I pretend to nothing.’ Many times he spoke of himself in terms of the greatest self-abasement, which I cannot now particularly remember,—I thought I could discern, in these expressions, the glimpses of the approaching day, and have no doubt at present but that the Spirit of God was gradually preparing him, in a way of true humiliation, for that bright display of gospel grace which he was soon after pleased to afford him.”

Cowper appears to have possessed very clear and scriptural views of the spirituality of religion. He considered what are called the ordinances as mere empty observances, unless accompanied with that inward and spiritual grace of which they are the symbols, and all the external duties of religion, however scrupulously and exactly performed, as a lifeless body, unless the heart was animated and sanctified by the sensible influences of the spirit of God. Up to the period of the preceding extracts no radical change seems to have been effected in the mind of John Cowper. It is true his pride had been in some degree softened by the effects of disease, and his spirit subdued by suffering, while his affection for his brother was increased by the soothing and fond attentions which he constantly paid to him. But the strong hold of self-righteousness was not yet broken up—that refuge of lies, the hope of salvation through his own merits, was not swept away. There is, however, cause to believe that the work of the Spirit was begun in his heart. Secretly and silently it had been preparing the way of the Lord, and he was pleased “suddenly to come into his temple,” to sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and

in a short period to accomplish a change as astonishing to the one who was the subject of it, as it was delightful to him who had so often and so fervently prayed, that it might be the happy experience of his brother. Cowper thus describes it:—

“On Saturday the 10th of March, about three in the afternoon, he suddenly burst into tears, and said with a loud cry, ‘Oh, forsake me not!’ I went to his bed-side, when he grasped my hand, and presently by his eyes and countenance I found that he was in prayer. Then turning to me, he said, ‘Oh, brother, I am full of what I could say to you.’ The nurse asked him if he would have any hartshorn or lavender. He replied, ‘None of those things will serve my purpose.’ I said, ‘But I know what would, my dear, don’t I?’ He answered, ‘You do, brother.’

Having continued some time silent, he said, ‘Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth,’—then after a pause, ‘Ay, and he is able to do it too.’

“I left him for about an hour, fearing lest he should fatigue himself with talking, and because my surprise and joy were so great that I could hardly bear them. When I returned, he threw his arms about my neck, and leaning his head against mine, he said, ‘Brother, if I live, you and I shall be more like one another than we have been. But, whether I live or not, all is well, and will be so; I know it will; I have felt that which I never felt before, and am sure that God has visited me with this sickness to teach me what I was too proud to learn in health. I never had satisfaction till now. The doctrines I had been used to, referred me to *myself* for the foundation of my hopes, and there I could find nothing to rest upon. The sheet-anchor of the soul was wanting. I thought you wrong, yet wished to believe as you did. I found myself unable to believe, yet always thought that I should one day be brought to do so. You suffered more than I have done before you believed these truths; but our sufferings, though different in their kind and measure, were directed to the same end. I hope he has taught me that, which he teaches none but his own. I hope so. These things were foolishness to me once but now I have a firm foundation and am satisfied.’

“In the evening, when I went to bid him good night, he looked steadfastly in my face, and with great solemnity in his air and manner, taking me by the hand, resumed the discourse in these very words. ‘As empty and yet full; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things—I see the rock upon which I once split, and I see the Rock of my salvation. I have peace in myself, and if I live, I hope it will be that I may be made a messenger of peace to others. I have learned *that* in a moment, which I could not have learned by reading many books for many years. I have often studied these points, and studied them with great attention,

but was blinded by prejudice; and unless he who alone is worthy to unloose the seals, had opened the book to me, I had been blinded still. Now they appear so plain, that though I am convinced no comment could ever have made me understand them, I wonder I did not see them before. Yet great as my doubts and difficulties were, they have only served to pave the way, and being solved, they make it plainer. The light I have received, comes late, but it is a comfort to me that I have never made the gospel truths a subject of ridicule. Though I dissented from the persuasion and ways of God's people, I ever thought them respectable, and therefore not proper to be made a jest of. The evil I suffer, is the consequence of my descent from the corrupt original stock, and of my own personal transgressions; the good I enjoy, comes to me as the overflowing of his bounty; but the crown of all his mercies is this, that he has given me a Saviour, and not only the Saviour of mankind, brother, but *my* Saviour.' ”

There could scarcely be selected from the whole scope of language, terms more strikingly descriptive of the change which had been wrought in John Cowper, than this short but comprehensive sentence, “As empty, and yet full—as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.” All his learning, his critical knowledge of ancient languages, his elaborate explanations of Scripture, his nice distinction between terms, his strict morality, his round of religious observances, his preaching and praying, were all felt to be entirely worthless, because they wanted that life-giving influence which only could render them in any wise beneficial. Emptied of all these, stripped of his own righteousness, destitute of whatever he had before built his hopes upon, he might well be considered as having nothing—nothing of his own—but at the same time, having received the gift of faith in the all-sufficient atonement and mediation of the adorable Redeemer, and experienced his blessed spirit to apply them to his own immediate wants, he realized that state which the apostle desired might be the experience of the Colossians, that “Christ might dwell in their hearts richly by faith;”—and having his glorious presence there, he might well be said to “possess all things.”

“It was remarkable, that from the very instant, when he was first enlightened, he was also wonderfully strengthened in body, so that from the 10th to the 14th of March we all entertained hopes of his recovery. He was himself very sanguine in his expectations of it, but frequently said, that his desire of recovery extended no further than his hope of usefulness; adding, ‘Unless I may live to be an instrument of good to others, it were better for me to die now.’

“As his assurance was clear and unshaken, so he was very sensible of the goodness of the Lord to him in that respect. On



the day when his eyes were opened, he turned to me, and in a low voice said : ‘ What a mercy it is to a man in my condition to *know* his acceptance ; I am completely satisfied of mine.’ On another occasion, speaking to the same purpose, he said : ‘ This bed would be a bed of misery, and it is so—but it is likewise a bed of joy and a bed of discipline. Was I to die this night, I know I should be happy. This assurance, I hope, is quite consistent with the word of God. It is built upon a sense of my own utter insufficiency and the all-sufficiency of Christ.’ At the same time, he said : ‘ Brother, I have been building my glory upon a sandy foundation ; I have laboured night and day to perfect myself in things of no profit ; I have sacrificed my health to these pursuits, and am now suffering the consequence of my misspent labour. But how contemptible do the writers I once highly valued now appear to me ! ‘ Yea, doubtless, I count all things loss and dung for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord.’ I must now go to a new school. I have many things to learn. I succeeded in my former pursuits. I wanted to be highly applauded ; and I was so. I was flattered up to the height of my wishes ; now, I must learn a new lesson.’ ”

With peculiar propriety may we say of many young persons at the present period, that they “ labour night and day to perfect themselves in things of no profit, even sacrificing health to those pursuits,” which are of comparatively trivial moment. To say nothing of the sinful waste of time and health in dress and company, and the slavish devotion to getting money ; how many are inordinately pursuing after science and literature, to the almost total exclusion of every thing like religious thoughtfulness ! The acquisition of useful knowledge, and the cultivation of those talents with which a wise and beneficent Creator has endowed us, are certainly laudable when kept within proper limits. But if suffered to engross the mind, and divert it from attention to the infinitely more important concerns of religion, they then become criminal ; and those who fall into this temptation, though they may reap the laurels of human applause, and rejoice in having their names recorded as the patrons of literature and the friends of science ; yet one day they will have, with the subject of this memoir, to make the mournful and humiliating acknowledgment, “ *I have been building my glory on a sandy foundation.*”

“ On the evening of the 13th, he said, ‘ What comfort have I in this bed, miserable as I seem to be. Brother, I love to look at you. I see now who was right, and who was mistaken. But it seems wonderful, that such a dispensation should be necessary to enforce what seems so very plain. I wish myself at Olney ; you have a good river there, better than all the rivers of Damascus. What a scene is passing before me ! Ideas upon these subjects

crowd upon me faster than I can give them utterance. How plain do many texts appear, to which, after consulting all the commentators, I should hardly affix a meaning; and now I have their true meaning without any comment at all. There is but one key to the New Testament: there is but one interpreter. I cannot describe to you, nor shall ever be able to describe, what I felt in the moment when it was given to me. May I make a good use of it! How I shudder when I think of the danger I have just escaped. I had made up my mind upon these subjects, and was determined to hazard all upon the justness of my own opinions."

When Christianity is stripped of the trappings with which human wisdom and invention have disfigured it, it presents the same lovely and simple aspect under every profession. That there is but "one key" and "one interpreter" to the Holy Scriptures, is a truth which is sealed in the practical experience of every spiritually-minded disciple of Jesus. How wonderful and convincing are the Spirit's teachings. Under its holy enlightening influences, things previously dark and abstruse are made plain and easy, passages which learned commentators have in vain puzzled themselves to reconcile or expound, receive their true meaning, and the beauty, harmony and sublimity of the Bible, are seen in all their intrinsic lustre. Why then should the professors of the name of Christ be so slow in receiving a doctrine fraught with such rich and precious advantages, and which is engraven with clearness and precision on the page of written revelation.

"Speaking of his illness, he said, he had been followed night and day from the very beginning of it with this text: *I shall not die, but live and declare the works of the Lord*. This notice was fulfilled to him, though not in such a sense as my desire of his recovery prompted me to put upon it. His remarkable amendment soon appeared to be no more than a present supply of strength and spirits, that he might be able to speak of the better life which God had given him, which was no sooner done than he relapsed as suddenly as he had revived.

"His experience was rather peace than joy, if a distinction may be made between joy and that heart-felt peace which he often spoke of in the most comfortable terms; and which he expressed by a heavenly smile upon his countenance under the bitterest bodily distress. His words upon this subject once were these:—"How wonderful is it, that God should look upon man, especially that he should look upon *me*! Yet he sees me, and takes notice of all that I suffer. I see him too; he is present before me, and I hear him say, *Come unto me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" Matt. xi. 28. On the fourteenth, in the afternoon, I perceived that the strength and spirits which had been afforded him, were suddenly withdrawn, so

that by the next day his mind became weak, and his speech roving and faltering. But still, at intervals, he was enabled to speak of divine things with great force and clearness. On the evening of the 15th, he said, 'There is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, than over ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance. That text has been sadly misunderstood, by me, as well as by others. Where is that just person to be found? Alas, what must have become of me if I had died this day seven-night? What should I have had to plead? My own righteousness? *That* would have been of great service to me, to be sure. Well, whither next? Why, to the mountains to fall upon us, and to the hills to cover us. I am not duly thankful for the mercy I have received. Perhaps I may ascribe some part of my insensibility to my great weakness of body. I hope at least, that, if I was better in health, it would be better with me in these respects also.

"The next day, perceiving that his understanding began to suffer by the extreme weakness of his body, he said: 'I have been vain of my understanding and of my acquirements in this place; and now God has made me little better than an idiot, as much as to say, Now be proud if you can. Well, while I have any senses left, my thoughts will be poured out in the praise of God. I have an interest in Christ, in his blood and sufferings, and my sins are forgiven me. Have I not cause to praise him? When my understanding fails me quite, as I think it will soon, then he will pity my weakness.'"

His deep conviction of the hatefulness of sin, and the corruptions and hardness of his own heart, often brought him low, and made him almost doubt whether his change could be real, or whether the peace and joy which he felt were not the effect of delusion. But these moments of doubt and conflict were succeeded by the renewal of those consolations which are in Christ Jesus, and that assurance of pardon and reconciliation which can only be realized by the sincere believer in his atonement, and in that redemption which is wrought by his spirit.

"'I see myself odiously vile and wicked. If I die in this illness, I beg you will place no other inscription over me than such as may just mention my name and the parish where I was minister; for that I ever had a being, and what sort of a being I had, cannot be too soon forgot. I was just beginning to be a deist, and had long desired to be so; and I will own to you what I never confessed before, that my function and the duties of it were a weariness to me which I could not bear. Yet, wretched creature as I was, I was esteemed religious, though I lived without God in the world.' About this time I reminded him of the account of Jane-way's, which he once read at my desire. He said he had laughed at

it in his own mind, and accounted it mere madness and folly ; ' Yet base as I am,' said he, ' I have no doubt now but God has accepted me also, and forgiven me all my sins.'

" In a time of severe and continual pain, he smiled in my face, and said, ' Brother, I am as happy as a king.' The day before he died, when I asked him what sort of a night he had had, he replied, ' A sad night, not a wink of sleep.' I said, ' Perhaps, though, your mind has been composed, and you have been enabled to pray.' ' Yes,' said he, ' I have endeavoured to spend the hours in the thoughts of God and prayer ; I have been much comforted, and all the comfort I got came to me in this way.'

" The next morning I was called up to be witness of his last moments. The Lord, in whose sight the death of his saints is precious, cut short his sufferings, and gave him a speedy and peaceful departure.

" He died at seven in the morning, on the 20th of March, 1770."